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Gaining Community Acceptance of Affordable Housing Projects and Homeless Shelters

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and the Housing and Homelessness Branch of Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), formed a partnership to create and pilot a workshop in Ontario called *Strategies for Gaining Community Acceptance* for affordable housing projects and homeless shelters. Following the successful pilot, workshops have been held both within and outside of Ontario (for example, Halifax and Vancouver).

The workshops' primary objectives were to:

- Build the capacity of municipal housing managers, planners, providers of public and private affordable housing and homeless services, community groups proposing affordable housing projects and homeless shelters, to avoid and address "protectionist attitudes and exclusionary/oppositional tactics adopted by community groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighbourhood."[1] – often referred to as "Not In My Back Yard" or "NIMBY";
- Provide insight into the reasons for opposition to affordable housing and homeless shelters, and how such opposition is manifested;
- Provide tools and examples of best practices and strategies to gain community acceptance and to increase workshop participants' level of awareness of NIMBY experiences in other communities and by other service providers;
- Provide information-sharing opportunities; and
- Mitigate the risk of community opposition and elongated project development time as a result of NIMBY.

CASE STUDIES

CMHC and the Housing and Homelessness Branch developed 46 case studies from across Canada. Each case presents:

- NIMBY issues that have resulted in significant opposition to projects for affordable housing and homelessness;
- Community concerns;
- The proponent's process with the community; and
- Lessons learned.

The case studies include a variety of projects:

- Shelters for the homeless, young people and victims of family violence;
- Transitional and long-term affordable housing;
- Supported housing and independent living facilities; and
- Low-rise and high-rise housing.

The studies focus on a broad demographic spectrum, including seniors, women, young people, people with mental health issues, people with addiction issues, people with disabilities, Aboriginal people and recent immigrants.

Wolch, J. and M. Dear (1993). *Malign neglect: Homelessness in an American city.* (Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco)

Canada

CMHC SCHL
HOME TO CANADIANS

The case studies, by region, are:

B.C.	Cates Hill Development – Bowen Island	Lakeside Place – Nelson
	Dusk to Dawn – Vancouver	Mole Hill Development – Vancouver
	Hyland House – Vancouver	
Prairies	Bob Ward Residence – Calgary, Alta.	My Home Project – Saskatoon, Sask.
Ontario	Argus Residence for Young Men – Cambridge	Peel Youth Village – Mississauga
	Bray's Lane – Oakville	Peterborough Community Housing Development Corporation – Peterborough
	Columbus Estate – Chatham	Rotary House – Thunder Bay
	Farnworth Manor Homes – Ottawa	St. Jude Community Homes – Toronto
	Frontenac Community Mental Health Services – Kingston	St. Lawrence Street Project – Toronto
	Good Shepherd Non-Profit Homes Inc. – Hamilton	Sojourn House – Toronto
	Guelph Campus Co-op Re-development – Guelph	The Salvation Army Lighthouse – Oakville
	House of Friendship – Kitchener	Tolpuddle – London
	Iris House – Windsor	Tom Lamothe Residence – Ottawa
	Matrix Building – Guelph	Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre Residence – Ottawa
	Muslim Senior's Home – Toronto	Wyndham House for Young Men – Guelph
	Nash Kanonhsa House – Windsor	YWCA Shelter – Sudbury
	Ottawa Transitional House – Ottawa	
Quebec	Le Manoir A. Pierre Lanctôt – Châteauguay	La Villa de l'avenir – Val-Bélair
	Église St. Étienne – Montréal	Samakhi Housing Cooperative – Montréal
Atlantic	Abe Zakem House – Charlottetown, P.E.I.	Iris Kirby House – St. John's, N.L.
	Bedford Macdonald Shelter – Charlottetown, P.E.I.	Metro Turning Point – Halifax, N.S.
	Cabot Habitat for Humanity – St. John's, N.L.	Nahum Women's Centre – Halifax, N.S.
	Camden Park Cottages – Moncton, N.B.	Native Friendship Centre – St. John's, N.L.
	Carew Lodge – St. John's, N.L.	Rawlins Cross – St. John's, N.L.

METHODOLOGY

These cases were drawn from a literature search and discussions with housing experts; service providers; developers; national housing organizations; and local, provincial, and federal government staff.

Each case study includes:

- project name and location
- construction type and target residents
- project proponents
- project outcomes and time frame
- background
- concerns with the project and community response
- proponent's process with the community
- strategies
- sources.

RESULTS

While each case is unique, there are common threads — the importance of communicating project objectives, the commitment of proponents and volunteers and the importance of building partnerships. Most cases provide strategies useful to affordable housing and homelessness proponents across Canada.

Common Concerns

Many people raise concerns out of a fear that a project will draw an element to their neighbourhood that they consider to be undesirable (low-income individuals and families, at-risk youth, people with physical or mental disabilities). This often manifests itself as safety concerns. In many cases, there is a lack of knowledge or information about a project or its residents underlying the concerns. In some cases, the concern is the impact of growth on the community.

Some people are uncomfortable with change or exhibit blatant discrimination. Often, opponents make only some of their concerns visible (much like the tip of an iceberg). Key concerns can include:

Awareness

- Lack of awareness about the project, contributing to unease when the idea is broached.
- Lack of information or knowledge, or both.

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- Misconceptions about the proposed function of the structure.

Concerns about New Residents

- Concerns that new residents would negatively affect community safety.
- Concerns that the new project would attract an "undesirable" element.
- Discrimination against the new residents.
- A misinformed connection between low-income families and crime.

Property Values

- Concerns about property values being negatively affected.
- Concerns about high-density housing, with fears of crime or the lowering of nearby property values.
- Concerns that affordable rentals would be sold off once approval for the project was granted.
- Demand for market-driven rather than low-income housing.

Community Impact

- A different vision for the proposed site location.
- Concerns about increased traffic.
- Esthetic concerns – structures would not fit with existing residential buildings.

USEFUL STRATEGIES FOR GAINING ACCEPTANCE

The case studies show that proponents of affordable housing and accommodation for the homeless use a variety of successful strategies to gain acceptance for their projects:

Communication — Early, Open, Frequent, Clear and Accurate

The key to any successful project is open and honest communication with neighbourhood residents, municipal officials and the media. The purpose is to:

- Demonstrate the value of the project.
- Create a transparent process.
- Educate and inform the community.
- Maintain a regular flow of information and ensure as many people as possible are aware of the project.
- Build support through community connections – bring like-minded agencies together to support the project.
- Allay community concerns about the project.
- Focus on the facts, not the arguments.

Appropriate communication can promote and maintain good relationships with neighbours. The various strategies for community consultations include public meetings, one-on-one consultations, flyers and poster distribution and media exposure.

As well, the development of a communication strategy will assist community groups in preparing for objections to housing projects.

Effective Use of the Media

The media are an effective tool for informing the public and gaining community acceptance. Suggested strategies include:

- Regular contact with the media through news releases, articles and interviews to ensure the project is "front and centre" in the mind of the community.
- Positive exposure in the media can help bring understanding and acceptance for a project.

Develop Relationships with Local Politicians

Suggested strategies include:

- Consulting with local politicians very early in the process to gauge support.
- Ensuring that local politicians are informed about "sensitive" issues and updating them throughout the process.
- Lobbying, if necessary, for the support of local politicians through letter-writing campaigns, attendance at council meetings and other community events.
- Identifying political "champions" who can act as intermediaries.

Good relationships with local or community leaders, associations, groups and agencies are very important. They can be partners in, or supporters of, the project and offer help and advice in educating and informing people, thus dispelling fears and preconceived notions, as well as gaining community acceptance for the project.

Develop a Clear Plan

Good planning permits proponents to anticipate problems. It allows them to proactively identify and prepare for potential concerns, as well as mediate potential opposition. Strategies that have succeeded include:

- Making sure that the proponent team is aware of all requirements before starting the process.

- Knowing the history of the site and the community context surrounding it.
- Clearly defining all aspects of the project before building.
- Ensuring the project plan is open to the public.
- Developing a community relations and communication plan.

Good planning can also lead to the community feeling included, which can deter opposition before it even appears (for example, encouraging input from the community, arranging for the community to visit the project site as it evolves).

Understand the Community Process

Understanding the community's process for new projects is a key strategy. Suggestions include:

- Understanding existing zoning regulations and, whenever possible, working within them to reduce potential delays.
- Understanding local bylaws and how they can be used for, or against, the project.
- Working with city staff to identify potential pitfalls and seeking their advice on how to address them.
- Having community agencies rather than government act as proponents to reduce the opportunity for delays related to political influence.
- Working with those who have previously successfully gained community acceptance.

Persistence

Proponents need to be aware that these types of projects take time. As a result, it is essential that supporting groups not only maintain momentum within their own organizations, but also within the community.

CONCLUSION

Proponents of affordable housing and homeless accommodation projects need to be aware that they may face community opposition. The reasons stated for this opposition may not be complete—some opposition, like most of an iceberg, may lie below the surface, but there are strategies, based on the experiences of successful project proponents across Canada, for gaining community acceptance.

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Housing Research at CMHC

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